

CALL IT FAITH BASED PAROLE

By Dana E. Sullivan

There are times when government doesn't say boo about separation of church and state — especially when preaching a little religion may mean keeping more ex-cons on the straight and narrow.

Just ask former Monmouth County Judge John D'Amico Jr., who as state Parole Board chairman has been making the rounds at churches and other religious-oriented facilities in hopes of having a better chance to keep the state's 14,000 parolees from returning to prison.

It's a never-ending challenge, and D'Amico has concluded he is more likely to succeed with religious leaders on his side.

It might even be loosely characterized as his faith-based option.

So, D'Amico has decided it's better at times to be practical than strictly constitutionally correct.

Indeed, his approach may just have something to do with the headlines about New Jersey's ever-declining prison population.

D'Amico is the first to admit it's not just the material and organized support networks of religious and volunteer groups that has him seeking their help.

He believes parolees need spiritual help, too, so he's asked the state's priests, ministers, rabbis, imams and lay groups to help instill in parolees some religious feeling that spurs a sense of compassion and caring for others.

"A lot of the reasons offenders end up back in prison have to do with what's in their hearts and minds," D'Amico said.

Filling the spiritual void can help parolees deal with what D'Amico calls the five known predictors of recidivism: anti-social values, anti-social peers, poor self-control, family dysfunction and absence of accepting responsibility for past crimes.

While the state has programs to help parolees get back on their feet, seek addiction treatment if needed and find jobs, he said, spiritual influences can take the edge off attitudes hardened by years of crime and prison life.

Ground rules

And even though his speeches quote passages from the New Testament about love and caring, he said he's not promoting any particular religion.

"We do have ground rules for our involvement with the faith-based community," D'Amico said. "We cannot mandate attendance in a faith-based program, and the parole board does not proselytize."

The former civil judge has been making the rounds in the state's larger cities, leading forums and workshops.

At these sessions, D'Amico admits that even with a \$90 million parole budget, the state can't do everything.

At a recent forum in Paterson, he came away with nearly 100 signatures from religious and civic leaders and other volunteers pledging support.

These volunteers are organized into task forces, and parole board staff helps the groups schedule meetings and follow through on their initial enthusiasm.

"We've found many people of good will have not been asked for help in any meaningful way before," the state's parole czar said.

He cites the example of one group, the Most Excellent Way, which uses a Scripture-based approach toward addiction treatment, while at the same time helping addicts with material needs.

Of 491 parolees in that program last year, only 29 left. Through an alliance with the Salvation Army, many of them received clothing, furniture, treatments, job referrals and placement in housing.

And more than half of those parolees volunteered to help the Salvation Army, D'Amico noted.

Another faith-linked program with a pilot just getting under way is called Pathfinders, in which volunteer "life coaches" will mentor ex-offenders one-on-one in their return to the community.

The coaches for the pilot are being recruited from congregations in Monmouth County.

Declining numbers

New Jersey has bucked a national trend in that its prison population is on a downward trend, and that, he said, is partly due to several parole reforms.

In 1999, for example, more than 5,400 parolees were returned to prison,

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while 3,100 inmates were released that year.

While that might seem odd, the average parole is three years, so the recidivism figure isn't always a subset of the number of releases.

In 2004, the recidivism number was down to fewer than 2,900, compared to 8,000 releases.

He attributes better success in parole to at least three factors beyond the parole board's traditional programs:

- more drug and alcohol treatment;
- more community involvement;

and

- "graduated response" to technical or minor parole violations.

The graduated-response program allows parole officers to use remedies other than arresting parolees.

For instance, if a parolee can't attend a scheduled meeting with the parole office because of a job, the schedule is adjusted rather than forcing the ex-inmate to leave the job under threat of being sent back to prison.

Or a parolee who fails a urine test will be referred to a more-intense treatment program rather than being sent back to prison. D'Amico said this takes into account the reality of addiction treatment — that there are relapses.

Community emphasis

D'Amico's appeal to the community seems to be on the right track, according to one group that has studied the issue.

"All re-entry is local," said Nancy L. Fishman of the Newark-based New Jersey Institute for Social Justice.

The institute has made several recommendations about what the state could be doing to improve parolees' success, "but the state frankly cannot do it all on its own," Fishman said.

"Communities have to take ownership," she added.

The head of an influential clerical organization thinks D'Amico is "absolutely" correct in his twin focus on community and faith.

"The faith community has a tremendous responsibility to try to help these people, to help keep them from turning around and going right back to prison," said the Rev. Reginald T. Jackson, ex-

ecutive director of the Black Ministers Council of New Jersey.

"I think there's more we can do and more we ought to do," Jackson said. For example, his own church, St. Matthews A.M.E. Church in Orange, has outreach programs to help juvenile detainees as well as adult prisoners to help them get ready for release. Reaching out to their families is very important too, he said.

Government officials needn't be shy about asking religious organizations for help, Jackson said. Clergy and lay groups can help with counseling, job networking, providing mentors, "and someone they might need to talk to when they're tempted."

"There are some things we can do better than government can," he said.

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